Sorry we missed you:

the many echoes and omens from the gig economy

David Zigmond

A year before our Covid 19 maelstrom a film, *Sorry we missed you*, portrayed with trenchant and stark clarity the frequent personal effects of the gig economy for those at the bottom end of the consumer chain. This belated but now even more timely review asks: what is the wider relevance of this for our Welfare and healthcare, especially now that our complex economy is rendered even more perilous?

Ken Loach's latest film *Sorry we missed you* in 2019 would, I hoped at the time, produce a widespread shock to our compassionate senses. And then, within months, there was Covid-19…

Yet now, a year later, Covid-embattled and battered, our economy continues: cybernating services to quickly parcel and despatch objects of our whim and choice (and there are few of us who exclude ourselves from this) survive to serve us. Loach's study and story here cast grim shadows we rarely wish to see. These are projected from the human hinterland of our expediently slick and customer-responsive growth economy: the competitive capitalism that feeds insatiably with and from our market-stimulated consumerism.

Loach chose the gig economy in the north of England to example and examine this. Ricky and Abbie, a lovingly married late-30s couple with two children struggle to make ends meet, especially since their house purchase failed due to the financial collapse in 2008. Abbie works as a Home Carer for the vulnerable elderly and disabled; Ricky now finds work as a van courier for a fiercely-managed parcel delivery company.

Ricky is initially excited – seduced even – by the zero-hours contract, conditions and culture. 'You don't work *for* us, you work *with* us' prescribes the foreman with a kind of menacing, domineering friendliness few can refuse.

Both Ricky and Abbie are now working as 'free' agents for highly competitive organisations. Ricky delivers parcelled objects ordered by consumers, while Abbie delivers 'packages' of home care negotiated by health and social care commissioners. Both are employed on an earn-as-you-work basis under strict conditions, targets and deadlines. Although such 'provision of services' seems to offer Ricky autonomy and freedom, he initially fails to see the traps and limitations of such work-without-welfare.

He soon discovers the harsh penalties and sanctions that ensnare him when unavoidable problems stymie his 'delivery performance'. The small print of the large organisation defines just how individually expensive such specious 'freedom' can be in such an each-man-for-himself culture.

As things become more difficult for this brave but struggling couple, Ricky finds himself essentially alone at work: any possible fraternal support by co-workers is frightened off by the need for fealty to this watchfully spartan and competitively commercial regime. 'Do you think any of your doorstep customers are remotely interested in how you are? No! They are interested only in price, delivery and the item in their hand', growls the aggravated foreman to a fearful and disintegrating Ricky.

Abbie's predicament, though, is instructively different: true, she is also trapped in a zero-hours contract that makes ever-more demands within increasingly tight timeframes – all without adequate support or resources. Yet amidst this she is – mercifully – nourished and fortified by the personal bonds that grow from her work's personal care – the deepening affections and understandings she creates with her vulnerable and dependent 'clients'.

In brief scenes of unsentimental poignancy Abbie shows us, with repeated and painfully tender lyricism, the human heart of Welfare. It is this, amidst her unsympathetically managed and gruelling working conditions that keeps her going.

Loach's conviction and skill in weaving together such systemic and then intimate perspectives and understandings is masterful. In style he manages to combine the rightly-righteous, heroically dramatised political virtue of Berthold Brecht with the tender and warm intimate nuances of Mike Leigh. The acting, editing and screenplay are so seamlessly crafted as to almost conceal that this is not a documentary: such is this film's veracity, vitality and integrity.

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So what are the equivalents, the reflections, here for our current, now Covid-tested, NHS healthcare?

While no practitioners yet labour under zero-hours contracts, there are many who have long endured Ricky's sense of being manipulated, by any means 'necessary', to meet performance targets, contractual timeframes, or commissioners' stipulations. Increasingly, practitioners have found that any considerations of longer-term personal judgement, complexly human context or more holistic compromise have, hitherto, been evaded or dismissed as non-contractual irrelevancies.

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'Let's go! Get that cardboard off the floor!' barks Ricky's foreman at the continuously monitored and rated delivery drivers. 'Yes, I'm the number one nasty bastard here', he then announces before briefly explaining that he, too, is subject to the same processes: everyone's job depends on 'good' compliance and performance measurements.

Most long-served NHS healthcarers have, in recent years, talked with weary and alienated cynicism of the effect of equivalent types of management over the last decades of NHS reforms – those to make it more 'business-like'. Practitioners have described how their erstwhile, mostly good-enough (and often much better), colleagueial and fraternal professional networks – those based on trust, understanding and good morale – have been forcibly replaced by tightly and mistrustfully managed giant silos. There, now, personal knowledge and understanding disappears, to be replaced by ever-denser regulation and instruction which attempt (vainly) to shore-up the consequent collapsing morale and staff numbers…

So increasingly, remarkably, even senior doctors frequently report similar hapless and humiliated work frustration to Loach's portrayal of gig economy couriers. This was certainly a growing problem before our Covid-crisis and is unlikely to have vanished. Of course the doctors' pay and job security is considerably greater, but the two working cultures have nevertheless converged to remarkable similarity. Notably the only likely defenders of this harsh NHS factory culture have been financiers and executives who are anxiously protective of their investments or their senior jobs.

This is the legacy, the conundrum, that our decades of industrial and neoliberal reforms has brought our Welfare services. Can this Covid-crisis, and this film, help us see better our mistaken path?

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The characters in *Sorry we missed you* can instruct us: although Abbie shares much of her plight with Ricky, she is somewhat redeemed in ways that can now, perhaps, salvage some of our better NHS – her management has not (yet) destroyed the personal continuity of care she can offer. It is through these bonds that both Abbie and her dependent clients nourish their human spirit – the resonance, sentience and inclusion that make endurable life's stresses, sorrows and humiliations. For it is such trusting and humane familiarity that generates the kind of compassionate identifications that then sustains the giver as much as the recipient.

'Listen', says Abbie, sitting opposite and holding both hands of a chairbound elderly woman who apologises for her dependency, 'you do more for me than you can ever imagine'. So Abbie is kept afloat by this shared human raft despite the surrounding buffeting and frustrating managerial conditions. But Ricky has no such human buoyancy-aid in his place of work; he will sink alone.

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Ricky's plight is similar to so many NHS healthcarers in recent years. For there is little that now remains for them of the kind of personally networked and trusted working relationships of our earlier NHS – that which could provide and sustain not just our better motivation but then its fertile yet fragile fruit: personal continuity of care.

Reports of such losses have been legion and wide-ranging. Our no-one-knows-anyone-but-just-do-as-you're-told culture so easily makes uncared for, and care-less, 'homeless' strangers of us all. The commerced industry of parcel delivery services becomes kindred in nature to our healthcare provision. In our giant hospitals the demise of consultant-led firms leaves older doctors feeling kinless and childless, while juniors feel like institutionalised orphans. In our federated Primary Care Networks our Primary Care Service Providers (née Family Doctors, remember them?) are increasingly unlikely to know their patients, their locality, their staff or their colleagues. All this frustration is reflected in statistics of staff morbidity, mortality, career recruitment and attenuation.

And so it goes: as our contractual designs, instructions and regulations have burgeoned, our human connection and sense has perished. Strangely, our Covid maelstrom may have provided a kind of moratorium, a kind of respite or even shock-therapy for our disintegrating Welfare.

The gig economy is just one part of that. And while our Covid-stress may currently daze us from seeing such contextual historical and social patterns, we must soon – if we wish for a more viable Welfare culture – retrieve such larger views.

Could our post-Covid world be shocked and stunned into something much wiser, more compassionate and sustainable? I earnestly hope so.

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